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ABSTRACT

For one of a series of related assignments, students were to ride a Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) bus or commuter train through the heart of Chicago, to experience the contrasts among the people there, and to write about what was learned. The students were to take an analytical view: What does this collection of images tell the student about the city, about the CTA, about him or herself? Excerpts from one student's paper show that the images she collected are extended, focused, and refocused time and again. The conclusion of the assignment finds the student paying attention to the world with her whole being, and just as important, she is prompting her readers to do the same. (SG)

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Wading In:

JOHN DEWEY, PAULO FREIRE, AND THE CHICAGO TRANSIT AUTHORITY

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"Let no one be deluded that a knowledge of the path can substitute for putting one foot in front of the other."

-Mary Caroline Richards

The chairs in the classroom in which I used to teach were all bolted to the floor. There were thirty chairs, five rows of six, all permanently facing the front of the room. On the first day of class I always asked my students why they thought this was, why their seats were fastened to the floor during the construction of the building. After some uncomfortable mutterings and various embarrassing speculations someone always said, "Because they want us to look straight ahead, and not get distracted from the teacher." Someone else said, "Because they don't want us to move." And finally, "Because they want to keep things in order."

But an experientially based learning/writing pedagogy espouses distraction, movement, and disorder. It is about teachers and students becoming distracted enough from their assumed subject/object relationship to discover new and perhaps more compelling ways of learning and knowing. It is about movement--both from the →

classroom (physical risk) and toward community (social risk), and about becoming comfortable with disorder--with the inherrent linquistic anarchy that occurs in our attempt to transpose some piece of the world into words.

DISTRACTION: Imagining yourself As Subject

Writers realize that they are cameras and have their own film.

John Dewey, in his Experience and Education, holds that "educative" learning challenges the learner and must lead him or her to further challenges. But he says that this challenging process won't necessarily always occur in the traditional classroom. He urges educators to consider potential educative experiences outside of the classroom. Educators should be "intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc. in order to utilize them as educational resources." He goes on to say that traditional education "systematically dodged this responsibility. The school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard, was supposed to suffice" (40).

More recently, Paulo Freire has shed important light on the value of experiential learning. He makes a link between the learners' context and teaching pedagogy (which Ira Shor and others have adapted and extended). Freire suggests that it is not only the "traditional" classroom setting which may inhibit learning, but "traditional" teaching pedagogy as well. For Freire the educator as the overflowing pitcher of knowledge, whose role is to fill the empty vessels, the know-nothing students, is a demeaning and destructive metaphor. He implores

educators to create opportunities for the students to become participatory subects, rather than passive objects (receptacles) in the learning/writing process. Our task is to move the class toward community. Writing assignments evolving around shared experiences outside of the classroom are one way to bring this about.

If students can share the responsibility for the learning/writing process, it is more likely they will have greater confidence and self-esteem. So there is greater potential for them to gain more personal authority and a more invested voice in their writing. It's no secret that a clear writing voice with strong personal authority is often related to the writer's identity and self-concept. In short, sharing the responsibility for the writing/learning process opens students to their potential ability to respond to the assignment. At its best experiental learning is enabling, encouraging, and empowering.

The sequence of assignments which I discuss here is titled "Wading In." Though we will only deal with our experiences on the Chicago Transit Authority, this sequence also includes our spending the night at a homeless shelter, working a soupline, interviewing workers and laborers, and various other contexts. The assignments move from expressive to more analytical as we gain greater understanding via our experiences and readings/class discussions. Throughout we use photographic concepts and language to describe the writing process, so we are continually made more concretely aware of what we are doing. We are writers/cameras carefully putting frames around moments, moments we see through the lens of our accumulated experience, and our respective

cultural filters.

MOVEMENT: Image Collecting

Writer uses a zoom lens.

The first assignment is to ride a CTA (Chicago Transit Authority) El train or bus through the heart of the city--to skirt the housing projects, the factories and skyscrapers--to experience the contrast between street people, Polish washer-women, jack hammer operators, newspaper vendors, and the businessmen and women, who move with determination in their power suits and power ties, toward powerful places. If your intent is to observe carefully and to write, you can't ride the CTA through Chicago without learning about power--or about alienation and corruption. But this kind of learning/writing involves feelings as well as thoughts. It increases consciousness as well as knowledge. It prompts students to be subjects rather than objects in the learning/writing process. And this process involves the whole person--not only the rational and analytical, but the emotional, spiritual and physical parts of the self. This is the crux of experiential education or "whole person learning." We wade in to different ways of knowing. We wade in to transformative potential. Broadly speaking, when the whole person participates the "basics" of education can potentially shift from focusing primarily on intellectual content areas, the three R's, reading, writing, and arithmetic, to the education of the whole person, the three C's, compassion, courage and consciousness (Boys). And it is our wading in which can allow this to happen. Were I to go out on a limb, I might say that the

proponents of an experientially based writing/learning pedagogy are more concerned with the rapidly fading "search for meaning," than today's prevalent "search for marketability." Many English instructors' acutely understand that "meaning," like writing development, is a lot harder to define and measure than "marketability."

In the following images collected by Stephanie Rink, a freshman in my Composition class, we begin to see some of the heightened "whole person" consciousness I alluded to earlier:

"The train comes. I grab the first seat I see. It is next to an older white man, in his late fifties. He has wild gray hair, like Albert Einstein's, but more of it.

"It is quiet. No one is talking. A school girl is snapping her gum incessantly. I want to slap her but restrain myself. Most are looking out the windows, or moving their eyes around, taking in the scenery. Often, when our eyes meet, they quickly avert theirs. As if the meeting had revealed their souls and I am a voodoo priestess. I always try to look bored and indifferent. This way I feel both "cool" and protected."

And from later in the same paper:

"The backs of the buildings moving by are hard to appreciate. The speed makes it hard to analyze what type of people live in what type of house. Sometimes, in the summer, back doors are left open, and for a second I can see and envy a family having dinner in the kitchen, while I'm on my way to work. If there are children, there is always a "Big-Wheel" in a

yard that has no grass, only dirt and dust. The porches slant dangerously to one side and are painted a depressing gray.

Graffiti decorates the west side of the tracks, especially around Chinatown. Recently, Vietnamese have taken over that section of the city. Restaurants and food stores dash red and green to make the streets more festive. The graffiti doesn't say much. It is hard to read, but I do know that "Kiki loves Tino" and that's all that counts."

Stephanie had to move out of her familiar academic confines to collect these images. Though a library or a classroom may have been a safer, warmer and more predictable place to do her "homework", it may have also led to safe, predictable writing. It may have lacked the physical, emotional and even spiritual investment required on the El train. It may not have allowed her the opportunity to participate in the learning/writing process as a whole person.

DISORDER: Image Shuffling

Writer develops film/experience and considers a wider angled lens.

Many have finally decided that you can't isolate and teach grammar, syntax, diction, paragraph development, etc. as tidy little packages which are sequentially mastered by the students before being all pasted together in one final horrific event--the five paragraph theme. Writing is not an orderly process. And it becomes less so when you attempt to incorporate first hand experience. There are no five paragraph formulas that can contain it--that can keep the reeking stale drunk, the bitter

bonebiting Chicago wind, or the hot carbonic hiss of a factory whistle from exploding on the page. But writing is an ordering process--a disorderly ordering process. So what do we do with a bagful of clear sensual images (snapshots) that we think epitomize Chicago or the Chicago Transit Authority? How do we develop a paper from that disorder? One way is to look at these images--the pre/free writing we did before the experience, the notes we took during and after the train ride, and see what they look like as a whole. Do they collectively say something about the CTA or the city, or point you in a writing direction? Do issues such as societal alienation, cultural diversity, or socio-economic disparity emerge. Or perhaps a metaphor comes to mind--the city as machine, as carnival, as zoo, as refuge, as cesspool, as a terminally ill patient, as an inescapable trap or prison, as one big party. If so, begin there, from that wider analytic angle, which holds several of the close-up images together.

Or use Stephanie's technique, which is to recreate the EL ride experience chronologically by moving from one compelling image to the next as she rolls along the tracks. These images are extended, focused and refocused until they seem to epitomize some aspect of the city or the CTA. After this focusing process Stephanie may look at the collection of images with a wider angle or more analytical lens. What does this collection of images tell me--about the city, about the CTA, about myself? Perhaps as this collection of images is assimilated, and the angle of the lens continues to widen, some of the issues I mentioned above will emerge.

So it is a disorderly ordering process. There is the whole person response on the train, the heightened consciousness--the

image collecting, the feelings about the images, and perhaps even some analysis of what they might mean. Later while putting her paper together, while developing her "film" and shuffling images, she will probably again move continually between feelings and analysis as she did on the train. In this recursive process she will discover and rediscover new and old images and assign meaning to them.

Take a moment and reread the passages from Stephanie's paper. The alienation of the CTA and the city are already apparent. People ignore each other and avert their eyes. Stephanie herself is "bored and indifferent." There are too many open windows, doors and other pockets of life. She can't see inside, or get close enough to any of them to satisfy her. She seems to long for the images that she missed, the ones that flew by her window before she could get them down on paper.

We also get a feel for the diversity of the city. She takes in the socio-economic reality. The yards are dusty and barren, the porches "dangerous and depressing." Yet she envies the families that live there--all from a rolling glimpse of their dinner in the kitchen. Stephanie senses the racial and ethnic diversity as well--that the Vietnamese have "taken over" Chinatown. We are left with "Kiki loves Tino" and that's all that counts." And it may be that that one image, that bit of graffiti, reminded her of at least one thing everyone all up and down the EL line has in common--a need for love. In the wider context of the paper the reason that she says "Kiki loves Tino" and that's all that counts," is because for Stephanie, people count, and understanding the rich cultural diversity of the city counts. Love counts in the burnt out, decaying tenements as well

as in the gravity defying sparkling hi-rise lakeside condos. Though Stephanie didn't set out to deal with these "wide-angle" issues, her experience, her collection of images, led her to this understanding, to this underlying theme.

At the conclusion of Stephanie's paper it is dusk and she is waiting on the wooden platfrom for the train home.

"It is just before dark. It isn't, but if I closed my eyes for one minute it would be. It is that last little hint of light that usually dies unnoticed."

The point is that for Stephanie, and now for us, that last little hint of the day did not die unnoticed. Stephanie is conscious, awake, tuned in. She is paying attention to the world with her whole person. She is a noticer. And just as important, she is making noticers and attention payers of us--her readers. What more can we ask?

Boys, Mary. Lecture. Univ. of Chicago: October, 1989.

Dewey, John. Education and Experience. New York: Macmillan, 1938.

Richards, Mary Caroline. Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and Person. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Press, 1962 (introductory quote).